



Why is it so hard to  
speak frankly and  
directly to those  
we care about most?

# Safe sex

CHRISTMAS HOLIDAYS, 1990, AT MY CHILDHOOD HOME IN THE RURAL SOUTH: MY MOTHER BRAVELY PLACES my lover's photograph and memorial announcement in a prominent spot, where everyone entering may see it and its request for donations to AIDS charities. At the same time, no one asks after details of his death, or how I'm doing now, or expresses sympathy. The contradiction hangs over Christmas like

by **Fenton Johnson**

emotional smog. My family waits for cues from me; sunk in grief, I wait for gestures from them.

Until 3:00 A.M.-on the night before I leave, one of those white nights between Christmas and New Year's when several of my nephews, all in their twenties, are sitting around the kitchen table putting a larger dent in the holiday liquor supply than their parents (my older brothers and sisters) would like. I

have made two attempts to hit the sack, to be kept awake by the knowledge that only the living can do justice to the memory of the dead. To acquiesce in silence is to deny and betray their memories, their lives, their love.

And so I return to the kitchen, to hover like some tongue-tied Ghost of Christmas to Come until my sister asks bluntly, "What's on your mind?"

Her question gives me courage, or at least puts me on the spot, and this is my answer, a breathless torrent of words: "I'm filled with bitterness and rage that no one will acknowledge that my friend was my lover and that he died of AIDS, and I'm here to give the first annual AIDS prevention speech."

Silence. But! as you may imagine, rapt attention.

The extent of my hip, college-educated nephews' curiosity turns out to be exceeded only by the magnitude of their ignorance. Their questions range from the ludicrous to the touchingly explicit. The youngest understands HIV as more or less omnipresent, like common cold viruses, but somehow precipitated by the heat of sex—a kind of venereal phlogiston. In what I regard as a rear-guard attack, my older, college-educated sister insists that she knows a woman who contracted the virus from sitting in a hot tub with an infected man.

As we talk, I realize that I am the first person from the preceding generation to speak with my nephews about sex without passing judgment on the facts of their lives—the first to assume that they are doing it as often as men in their twenties have always done it, which is to say as often as opportunity presents.

This is far deeper water than I had anticipated, but once off the diving board I have no choice but to swim. If I'd thought before speaking, it would have been to hope that I could talk about HIV without discussing, well, *details*. But my nephews are too starved for information to allow that. "What about kissing?" one asks. "I kissed an HIV-positive man for four years and I still test negative," I say. "What about when you're going at it with a girl and she gets all juicy and you get that on your fingers?" another asks, and the question implies its own abyss. "If you don't know your partner's history, and you have reason to believe she or he may be at risk, and you really want to, um, *get down*, you might consider latex gloves," I say. A collective grimace. I fix my eyes on some imaginary point above and beyond my nephews' heads. "They're not so bad. My lover and I had great, messy sex. Often."

"You're blushing." This from my helpful sister.

"These were our rules," I say. (*Am I saying this? To my nephews?*) "We always used condoms. He never came inside me. I never came inside him."

"But wasn't that dangerous?" one asks.

At this I explode: "Life is dangerous! Driving a car is riskier than having safe sex and you never give driving a second thought. What you do is educate yourself to the risks and then act to minimize them."

"Have as many partners as you can be considerate and careful with, if that's what you want," I say. "But if nothing else, be careful. If you do needle drugs—" I add.

"Oh, no, we'd never be that stupid," they chorus.

"I'm not asking if you'd be that stupid," I reply. "I'm telling you how to take care of yourselves."

Two days later, I ride to the airport with one of my brothers. When I tell him I've delivered the first annual AIDS prevention speech to his sons, he says, "Oh, good." Then he tells me that, as part of his job, he delivers AIDS awareness talks. "So why haven't you delivered one to your kids?" I think, but I don't say this aloud; once again, my courage evaporates in the face of the great silence.

And now I am back in libertine San Francisco, contemplating these events after the fact. I am struck by my nephews' equation of AIDS and morality. "They told us sex was bad," one said. "AIDS is the proof." The question presents itself: Who are "they"? In a family no more prudish than most, how did my nephews come by the notion that sex is bad? And I, a gay man, know the answer: Children assume—not without reason—that if garrulous adults avoid a subject it must be bad; the more they avoid it, the worse it must be.

Gay men and lesbians come by this knowledge of guilt by omission earlier and more emphatically than most, but it's hardly ours alone. Most of us learn about sex via fumbling and osmosis, and my nephews, children of the children of the sixties, are no different.

Their questions may have been laughably naive, but I left Kentucky wondering this: Why are we withholding information that might save lives from people desperate to obtain it? I know the knee-jerk response—troglodyte government bureaucrats, the pernicious influence of the moral minority. But neither of these was present in the kitchen on that white post-Christmas night, preventing me from speaking out. I recall my conversation with my brother—his reluctance to talk to his sons, my own

**"Condoms are not so bad. My lover and I had great messy sex. Often."**



retreat into silence. I am the one who has known about HIV for years, after all. I have watched friends sicken and die, and yet I have said nothing, back in the hinterlands where speaking matters most. Why do I find it easier to talk (or write) about such issues for an audience of strangers than to speak directly and frankly to those I love?

AN EASY EXPLANATION LEAPS TO MIND, ONE THAT LETS ME OFF THE hook. It's because these are matters of the heart. The emotions that bring me to care in the first place stifle my tongue.

But it's also because of adults' social imperative to protect and preserve this most cherished illusion that as figures of authority we are in complete control of destiny, our own and our world's. In this tidy and comforting scenario, sex is the wild card, the lurking common denominator that's been known (oh, how we know it to be true) to reduce the most rational of us to the same whims, jealousies, emotions, mistakes as—well, teenagers. And if our children glimpse that we're no more perfect than they, who knows what chaos may result?

Judging from the skyrocketing incidence of sexually transmitted diseases of all kinds among young people, it's clear that ignorance is preventing few of them from having an unsafe time of it anyway. It's just that now they're ambushed by guilt and re- crimination after the fact. Campaigns for celibacy demand of teenagers that they exercise control that, at least in my experience, their elders have not been especially successful in achieving. Caught in the relentless grip of desire, even the wisest and strongest among us can remember and enforce precautions only if we have already created an atmosphere in which everyone, especially young people, can talk easily and collectively about sex.

And that means talk, and lots of it, much of it explicit. Some of that talk has to be in public forums—billboards, television, movies. But the most important part must take place between and among families and friends: adults talking to teenagers; adults talking to adults.

No one should underestimate the radical changes that such an information campaign implies for our public and private selves. Advertising and pornography (increasingly indistinguishable) offer all the evidence we need of our collective agreement to treat sex as a means to the ends of dominance, control, violence, profit. Sex as a cheerful fact of physiological life—the idea won't sell much beer, but it may save lives.

In John Berger's superb novel *G.*, the Marxist protagonist radicalizes Victorian women by enlightening them to the possibilities of erotic fulfillment. Once they understand what their bodies are capable of experiencing, there's no turning back.

Lovemaking as a life-affirming act, a radical and radicalizing act—I like that notion.

Okay, I admit it. Something more than HIV education was behind my Christmas tirade to my middle-American nephews. I wanted my nephews to understand HIV and its means of transmission, but I also wanted to expose them to the miraculous and exhilarating panoply of sexuality, to get them thinking about the enormity of our society's gap between what is

said and what is done, between the world we pretend to and glorify and the world in which we really live. In the end, I hoped to bring them to make their own connections between even the most casual sex and some kind of love: caring enough for one's partner and oneself to establish and respect limits.

NOW IT'S A YEAR LATER, CHRISTMAS 1991, AND MY NEPHEWS ARE driving me to the airport. I seize the chance to deliver the second annual AIDS prevention speech, but this time what's important is less the passing on of information than the conversation that follows. During the hour-plus drive, we talk about genealogy, family history, their father's divorce—how it affected their lives, why he finds it so difficult to raise the subject, why it's so hard for him to talk to them and them to him. I caution them against holding the previous generation to unrealistic standards. "Love is about forgiveness," I say—an acknowledgment that the beloved is human, fallible, and weak, and a decision to love him or her despite or maybe because of that knowledge.

As we talk, I realize that since speaking out I have become for them another, different kind of father: a comrade and repository of history; a bridge (maybe next Christmas?) between them and him. While my brother has given his children love of a duration and depth that I can only admire and learn from, my own love has its necessary place. I am younger; I haven't the inevitable and necessary burden of being father; I can say things to his children that he might never find his way to saying. In this collective way, all of us—grandparents, friends, aunts, uncles, cousins, lovers, parents—may find our way to our particular roles in defining what family is really about. Brought together by a chance alignment of stars, histories, and genes, we can act to build families based on love. □

*San Francisco writer Fenton Johnson is the author of a novel, Crossing the River (Dell/Laurel).*

## SAFE SEX INFORMATION

For more information for teens or adults, contact:

- **TEENS TAP (Teaching AIDS Prevention), 1-800-234-TEEN;** a hot line staffed by trained teens, available Monday through Friday, 4:00–8:00 P.M. CST.
- **The Hetrick-Martin Institute, Inc., 1-212-633-8920 or 1-212-633-8926 (TTY);** counseling and information for gay and lesbian youth.
- **Indianapolis Youth Group, 1-800-347-TEEN;** a hot line for gay and lesbian youth, available evenings, Thursday through Sunday, 7:00–11:45 P.M. EST.
- **Sex Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS);** send a self-addressed stamped envelope to receive a free copy of "How to Talk to Children about AIDS." Also available: a bimonthly journal on sexuality with two issues devoted to AIDS annually; write to 130 W. 42nd St., New York, NY 10036.